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SUBJECT: U.S. MILITARY TRAINING: WHAT THE PUBLIC IN KISANGANI THINKS

REF: 11/12 AF/RSA - Embassy Kinshasa email

KINSHASA 00001073 001.2 OF 003

¶1. (SBU) Summary: While local audiences in Kisangani are supportive of U.S. military training of the FARDC battalion, they have expressed concerns about the motivations of the U.S. effort, manner in which candidates are being vetted, and the nature of follow-on activities to sustain the battalion's integrity. Concerns over the training, if left unaddressed, could harm efforts to improve the civilian perception of the FARDC. In order to develop a sound public affairs strategy to convince Congolese audiences of the merits of the U.S. military training, Embassy Kinshasa and AFRICOM elements must continue efforts to conduct outreach to audiences and public-opinion makers. End summary.

¶2. (U) On November 26-27, APAO visited Kisangani to assess public views surrounding U.S. military training of the FARDC Light-Infantry Battalion. The visit followed meetings by an AF-OSD team to meet with civil society actors (see ref). APAO continued the discussions, and reached out to members of other target groups. Meetings with University of Kisangani administrators and academics, human rights groups, local journalists, and leaders for the Kisangani Archdiocese identified clear themes that illustrate the public view surrounding the U.S. training activity and overall U.S. role in the DRC.

What are U.S. motivations?

¶3. (SBU) While members of the local community were generally supportive of U.S. and international initiatives to train the FARDC, they continued to remain suspicious of U.S. intentions. Several interlocutors highlighted the 1998 invasion of Rwandan and Ugandan-supported rebel groups and expressed their belief that the invasion would not have happened without U.S. support. Given this belief, many questioned whether the presence of U.S. military trainers was a harbinger of another invasion of foreign-backed rebel groups.

¶4. (SBU) Academics noted their concern that, as past training had supported Mobutu's hold on power, the U.S. military training was a potential means to bolster President Kabila's government, and intentions by the Head of State to maintain his hold on power. The battalion would act as the potential tool to secure his power.

15. (SBU) Interlocutors also expressed the view that the construction of the Kisangani training facility was paving the way for a permanent Africa Command (AFRICOM) presence in the DRC, which would advance U.S. efforts to conduct anti-LRA operations, capture potential Islamic terrorists filtering in from Sudan, and protect U.S. economic interests in the region. The theme of ?balkanization? also emerged, as opinion-makers wondered whether the battalion's training was an attempt to divide the FARDC, and potentially create a fighting force that would be exploited by the U.S. and its Rwandan and Ugandan allies to promote the break-up of the DRC.

Is the training effective?

17. (SBU) Concerning the actual training, several human rights groups questioned the methodology of selecting candidates, and assurances that candidates did not have a dubious track record. Expressing skepticism that there were too few FARDC candidates who would be suitable for training, many asserted the training would ultimately need to bring in candidates who did not meet U.S. vetting standards.

18. (SBU) Interlocutors also revealed concerns about the training of a single battalion. Audiences appeared to be unconvinced that a battalion would be able to act as an effective model for the FARDC, citing the failure of past initiatives by donors to train Congolese military personnel. As certain civil society representatives contested, "didn't foreign militaries train Mobutu's army? Did that help to professionalize the military?"

KINSHASA 00001073 002.2 OF 003

What happens after the training?

19. (SBU) The most pressing concern expressed by audiences was what would happen after the training. Specifically, audiences and opinion-makers were concerned about how soldiers would be paid and fed following the training. When told the GDRC would have to take responsibility for the welfare of the battalion, audiences immediately expressed concern the government would be unable to satisfy the unit's future monetary and supply needs. As a result, any training activity would be unable to professionalize the FARDC.

USG outreach strategy

110. (U) During a meeting with public opinion-makers and specific interlocutors, APAO sought to respond accurately to questions and concerns about the U.S. training in Kisangani, using Washington TDY visit's meeting with civil society groups in October (see ref) as a basis for discussions. However, the significant interest and concerns raised by key representatives of Kisangani's community demonstrate the need for a concerted strategy to engage with local communities and justify the merits of U.S. military training of the FARDC battalion. Embassy Kinshasa plans to implement a strategy that (1) maintains regular contact with Kisangani public opinion makers to effectively address specific concerns and publicize positive elements of the training; (2) facilitates eventual dialogue between the FARDC and civil society groups to permit an exchange of information between the two entities; and (3) enhances U.S. public diplomacy outreach beyond a focus on perceptions of U.S. military training.

111. (U) Thus far, Embassy Kinshasa has sought to publicize U.S. public diplomacy efforts by highlighting

visits by U.S. officials such as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Vicki Huddleston, embedding journalists in seminars training FARDC officials on international humanitarian law, and publicizing medical donations to the FARDC. While the type of message is well-received by press and public opinion makers in Kinshasa, it fails to reach audiences in Kisangani. On numerous occasions, local public opinion makers informed APAO they were unaware of past local press reporting of U.S. initiatives to support and train the FARDC. To enhance the outreach to Kisangani audiences, PAS Kinshasa will work with USG trainers and OSC Kinshasa to rapidly and immediately disseminate any information on the training to newly established contacts. As part of a wider outreach effort, we will seek to work with AFRICOM's combat camera to provide audiences with footage of positive aspects of the battalion's training. We will also work with our colleagues to have sufficient local press coverage for events connected to the USG training, such as the January 2010 DIILS training seminar in Kisangani, as well as the rollout of the upcoming agricultural project.

¶12. (SBU) Embassy Kinshasa should also consider ways to facilitate dialogue between civil society and the FARDC. Several interlocutors appeared quite pessimistic about the FARDC's willingness to respect human rights practices following the departure of U.S. military trainers. They also noted their frustration at the lack of information being provided by the FARDC to local communities on the progress of military reform. A regular mechanism of contact between the FARDC and local audiences could alleviate these frustrations, enhance the level of confidence of the Kisangani population in the FARDC, and effectively complement our efforts to professionalize the Congolese battalion. As a precedent, interlocutors allude to past seminars in 2005 that brought together FARDC officials and civil society groups to discuss military integration. According to them, these discussions were supposedly received quite positively by all parties, and helped to build confidence between the FARDC and civil society.

¶13. (U) Finally, improvement of the public perception in KINSHASA 00001073 003.2 OF 003

Kisangani of the military training can be complimented by overall enhanced public diplomacy. In spite of suspicions of U.S. policy, there continues to be a keen appreciation in Kisangani for U.S. cultural values. Audiences also speak fondly of past U.S. assistance in the region, such as dormitories at the University of Kisangani that were constructed by USAID in 1970. Enhanced public diplomacy outreach will help to establish the notion that U.S. interest in Kisangani goes beyond military training. PAS Kinshasa will plan to maintain regular contact with local audiences and opinion-makers, disseminate products normally distributed in Kinshasa, and highlight regular public diplomacy programs for Kisangani audiences.

¶14. (U) Comment: Public views surrounding U.S. military training ranges from highly-sensational to justifiably concerned. A successful strategy to generate public support for U.S. training efforts in Kisangani will require a constant effort to comprehensively explain our objectives, and pro-actively address concerns raised by local audiences. Embassy Kinshasa will actively pursue such an effort. End comment.

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